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Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham (1852-1936): Dilatant or Visionary?

Introduction.

Brendan O'Hara, the first of the new intake of SNP MPs elected in May 2016, borrowed a line in his maiden speech from the maiden speech of Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham (hereafter RB)...¹ It was appropriate that following an election which had seen the virtual wipeout in Scotland of the political party most associated with James Keir Hardie, RB's erstwhile colleague in the Scottish Labour Party, that it should be RB who had turned his back on the Labour Party and seemed destined for political obscurity, who would be vindicated in his vision of Scottish Home Rule as a catalyst for social change as presented by the left of centre Scottish National Party.

RB is an enigmatic figure in the history of politics in Scotland and of Scottish nationalism. He had a hand in the formation and the leadership of three different political parties; the Scottish Labour Party (SLP) in 1888, the National Party of Scotland (NPS) in 1928 and the Scottish National Party (SNP) in 1934, and was the Member of Parliament for Lanarkshire North Western from 1886-1892. There is the impression that he was something of a dilatante, the *Glasgow Herald* called him a 'political free lance' and *The Times* characterised him as an 'aristocratic socialist and a cowboy dandy.'² At key periods in his adult life he chose adventure in the Argentine pampas or parleying in literary circles with such luminaries as Joseph Conrad and George Bernard Shaw over political action.

His friends and admirers were struck by his perceived ambivalent attitude to politics. John MacCormick said of him: '(he) was in politics (and in the best sense of the word) an adventurer who took keen delight in crossing swords with the Party Goliaths who gave little thought to any of the practical considerations which might weigh with other men.'³ RB's first biographer, his close friend Aimé Tschiffely, saw RB's strengths as an agitator for lost causes as opposed to being a party hack. 'He was' said Tschiffely, 'one of those rare men who could never fight on the side of strength. He was one who enjoyed a losing fight...'⁴ Another friend G.K Chesterton thought that RB's main problem was that he 'would never really be allowed in practical politics'.⁵ Scholars have similarly been dismissive of his political contribution: Pelling saw him as 'quite unsuited to the political life'⁶ and Jones described him as 'probably never a permanent part of anything'.⁷

¹ House of Commons Debates, 27th May 2015, col. 109.

² *Glasgow Herald* 21st March 1936, p.11. *The Times* 23rd March 1937, p.18.

³ John M. MacCormick, *The Flag on the Wind*. (Edinburgh: Birlin, 2003) Kindle edition. 558.

⁴ Aimé F. Tschiffeley, *Don Roberto, The Life of R.B. Cunninghame Graham*. (Kingswood: Heinemann, 1937), 260.

⁵ *ibid* 189.

⁶ Henry Pelling, *Origins of the Labour Party*, (Oxford: OUP, 1961), 105.

⁷ Peter D'a Jones, 'Henry George and British Labor Politics' *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, Volume 46, No.2 (April, 1987) 250.

Yet it would be wrong to see RB as a peripheral figure. He was indispensable to both the nascent Scottish Labour Party and fledgling Scottish National Parties as a marquee personality bringing prominence and star quality to these obscure movements as they were in 1888, 1928 and 1934 respectively. However it was not only his name recognition that was important. He was no mere figurehead. RB contributed to the intellectual development of both movements through his speeches and activities. As an MP between 1886 and 1892 he was one of the few self-proclaimed socialists in the Commons and he was to champion social justice and democracy not just in words but also in deeds most famously when he was sentenced to prison in 1887 as a result of a police raid on a demonstration at Trafalgar Square. He had been a supporter of Scottish Home Rule from 1884 onwards and was to fuse the case for self-government with advocacy for social change in a speech in 1889 presenting a vision of Home Rule that is arguably one of the precursors of modern commonweal and civic nationalism. His approach to Scottish Home Rule would also evolve. Initially an advocate of Gladstonian 'Home Rule all round' while keeping representation in the Imperial parliament, by the end of his life he supported independence on the model of the Irish Free State and the 1931 Westminster Declaration on Dominion Status.

It is impossible to do justice to the extraordinary life of RB in a short biographical sketch because as his grandniece Jean Cunninghame Graham observed 'there seemed to be *so much* of it' (her italics).⁸ Born in 1852, he was heir to series of estates and titles in Scotland. He was initially brought up in Cadiz but went to school in England where he attended Harrow for a couple of years. At the age of 16 he went to South America, first to Argentina, then Uruguay (where he enlisted in the army) then settled down as farmer in Mexico where he gained the moniker 'Don Roberto'. He was not the best businessman and went bankrupt on a number of occasions and eventually had to sell most of his estates in Scotland. He was kidnapped, was embezzled, became a fencing master, and had a formidable reputation as an equestrian attracting the praise of Buffalo Bill Cody. In addition he was an explorer most notably following the trails of the Jesuits in Central America. As well as Buffalo Bill and the future US President Theodore Roosevelt, he could count almost all of the literati of the late nineteenth century including William Morris, George Bernard Shaw, Joseph Conrad and Oscar Wilde as his acquaintances and this was all before he became an MP.

Although his travel adventures and his literary life are well chronicled in biographies, his political life is less well covered especially the last phase of his career as a Scottish Nationalist. This is particularly the case in the work of Jean Cunninghame Graham who does not even devote a single word to this period. Even his role in Labour history has been somewhat neglected. The modern incarnation of the Scottish Labour Party does not acknowledge his joint paternity in forming the original party bearing its name or that he was the first socialist and Scottish Labour MP.⁹ Some of the most respected studies charting the history of the Labour Party miss out both Cunninghame Graham and the SLP completely. This is

⁸ Jean Cunninghame Graham, *Gaucha Laird. The Life of R.B. "Don Roberto" Cunninghame Graham*. (London: The Long Riders' Guild Press, 2004) p.7.

⁹ <http://www.scottishlabour.org.uk/pages/history>. (accessed on 16th February 2016.)

especially the case of Pelling's *A Short History of the Labour Party* first published in 1961. There is one sentence in Pugh's *Speak for Britain* published in 2011¹⁰ though Pelling spends more time on the SLP and RB in his 1966 monograph, *The Origins of the Labour Party 1880-1900*.¹¹

Early Political Life.

RB had gravitated towards radical politics in the mid 1880s through attending meetings of the Fabian Society where he made the acquaintance of Beatrice and Sidney Webb, the Social Democratic Federation, founded by H.H. Hyndman where he met George Bernard Shaw, and its offshoot the Socialist League where he met William Morris. His preference was for the SDF as opposed to the Fabians whom he viewed as too 'precious' as well as too 'extreme'¹² However his political outlook as it developed was closer to the ideals of utopian socialists such as Robert Owen than followers of Marx such as Hyndman and Morris. It was not just in the salons of London's champagne socialists that his political outlook was being fashioned. He also read widely and like many other radicals of the era was profoundly influenced by the work of the American land reform campaigner Henry George especially his 1879 text *Poverty and Progress* which would inspire populists in the USA as well as land reform activists in Ireland and Scotland. RB however would break with the Georgists in 1888.¹³

RB was also an avid reader of the *Cumnock News* especially the articles written by local journalist and member of the Junior Liberal Association, James Keir Hardie. So impressed was he that when a meeting was arranged of the SDF in early 1885 in Cumnock, RB travelled to South Ayrshire to meet the journalist. He struck up a friendship with Hardie that would last until the latter's death in 1915 and a political partnership that would endure until RB went on his first sabbatical from politics in 1894. The role of RB in Hardie's political career was profound, he took him to the House of Commons on a number of occasions, introduced him to many of the most prominent radicals and socialists of the time including Frank Smith who would be his secretary for many years and got him onto the platforms of the organised Labour movement in London which would lead directly to Hardie becoming the independent Labour/Radical Association candidate for West Ham and MP in 1892.¹⁴

RB was however initially a Radical Liberal with socialistic leanings.¹⁵ The politics of mid and late Victorian Scotland had been energised through demands for radical reform covering a whole swathe of issues. There were demands for land reform

¹⁰ Pelling *A Short History of the Labour Party*, (London: Macmillan, 1961), Martin Pugh, *Speak for Britain!: A New History of the Labour Party* (London: Vintage, 2011)

¹¹ Pelling, *Origins of the Labour Party*.

¹² Cunningham Graham, *Gaucha Laird*. 289.

¹³ David Lowe *Souvenirs of Scottish Labour* (Glasgow: W. & R. Holmes, 1919), 32.

¹⁴ Holman, B. *Keir Hardie Labour's Greatest Hero?* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2010) Kindle edition, 54.

¹⁵ For an introduction to the Radical Liberals see T.W. Heyek and William Klecka "British Radical M.P.s, 1874-1895: New evidence from Discriminant Analysis" *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol.4 No.2 (Autumn, 1973), 161-184.

and rights for tenants that culminated in the 1880 Crofter's War. Calls for church reform had stemmed from the 1843 disruption in the Church of Scotland and the end of an overwhelmingly Protestant Scotland due to influence of the Irish Catholic community, an increasing force as a result of immigration and the extension of the franchise in 1867 and 1885. There had been calls for constitutional reform pushing for a Secretary for Scotland to bring order to the disparate administration of Scottish local government, education and justice. But also in calls for reform in working conditions as the full consequences of unregulated industrialisation were exposed and for moral reform with temperance a key component in the radical tradition of the era. The main vehicle for radical opinion in Scotland at this time was the Liberal Party.

The Party was however in a perilous state. It was, in the words of Fitzsimmons 'at best an uneasy, even tense alliance held together, as well as strained to breaking point by the genius and prestige of one man, William Ewart Gladstone',¹⁶ the 'Grand old man' (GOM) as he was characterised. Tensions were everywhere in the party most notably between the older Whigs and the younger radical Liberals, between supporters of laissez faire and those advocating state intervention, between the Liberal lairds and those that sided with the crofters, between the industrial plutocrats and supporters of organised labour. Gladstone managed to keep this dysfunctional party together until the mid-1880s, but only just. In 1886 there was the first of many haemorrhages, this one over Irish Home Rule, which would ultimately lead the party towards political oblivion. Tschiffeley claimed that, despite sitting ostensibly as a Liberal, RB; 'despised Gladstone with all his heart',¹⁷ though the GOM never seemed to show any ill will towards RB and had sent him a good luck telegram on the day of the 1886 General Election.¹⁸

External forces were also undermining the unity of the party with movements such as Charles Parnell's Irish Party. RB would form a close association with Parnell and often sat in the House with the Parnellites.¹⁹ He would be a stout defender of Parnell even when his relationship with Kitty O'Shea that led to his disgrace and resignation was exposed and led to his untimely death in late 1891. Following Parnell's death he lamented that 'He was human, like the rest of us.'²⁰ The Irish Party demonstrated that there was the possibility of political life outside of the two party system which had been formulated in the 1870s with the modern incarnations of the Conservative and Liberal Parties. There was also pressure coming from within the Labour movement to abandon the Liberal Party as so few workingmen were being selected or elected as candidates and it too would look to the Parnellites as a template. The founding of the Scottish Home Rule Association in 1886 can also be attributed to the success of the Irish Party.

Member of Parliament for Lanarkshire North West.

¹⁶ Fitzsimmons, M. A. "Midlothian: the Triumph and Frustration of the British Liberal Party," *Review of Politics* (1960), 187.

¹⁷ Tschiffeley, *Don Roberto*, 195.

¹⁸ Cunninghame Graham, *Gaucha Laird*, 301

¹⁹ Tschiffeley, *Don Roberto*, 255.

²⁰ House of Commons Debates 10th February 1892, col.135.

Cunninghame Graham's long public political life began when he was elected for the seat of Lanarkshire North West at the 1886 General Election. He gained the seat for the Liberals in what was otherwise a disastrous election for the party. In the UK the Liberals lost 128 seats in 1886 including 9 Scottish Liberal MPs.²¹ He won the seat with a majority of 332 overturning a tory majority of 1,103 from the previous year. He had stood in 1885 for the constituency but only after he initially had been selected as the Liberal candidate for a seat in Glasgow but chose to fight elsewhere to allow the prominent Scottish Land Restoration League (SLRL) campaigner John Shaw Maxwell, to stand on the League ticket.²² Crowley and Jones have both suggested that RB's election in 1886 was largely attributable to the Land League.²³ However RB attributed his victory to the fact that he was "Mr Parnell's man" and 'was returned to Parliament by Irish votes.'²⁴

RB did not make his maiden speech until early 1887 nearly six months after his election but he stamped an impression on Westminster as a result of his speech and appearance. His speech caused, according to the Pall Mall Gazette, 'a mild sensation' and suggested that he was 'no slight acquisition in these endless nights of dreary talk' and *Vanity Fair* called him a 'Scotch Home Rule Visionary.'²⁵ He was a frequent voice on the floor of the House making nearly 800 contributions as recorded in Hansard over six years. This was despite spending a fair part of late 1887 and early 1888 in Pentonville Prison following the riot in Trafalgar Square on 17th November and being suspended from the chamber twice. The first time was in December 1888 for unparliamentary language. He accused a senior Government Minister of a 'dishonourable trick' in refusing to answer his question on behalf of workers in Wolverhampton.²⁶ His second suspension came about when he denounced 'shareholders in swindling companies' during a debate on the Local Authorities (Purchase of Land) Bill. The speaker named and suspended him. Leaving the chamber, he remarked 'Suspend away... I do not care a damn.'²⁷ It would be one of his last contributions before losing his seat 'a final snort of contempt at the British Legislative machine' as Jean Cunninghame Graham summarised it.²⁸

He had decided to stand for the Glasgow Camlachie constituency for the SLP and not seek re-adoption as a Liberal in Lanarkshire North West. Alongside the other SLP candidates he went down to a heavy defeat but he was not particularly unhappy at leaving Westminster. He said,

I have been foolish enough to soil myself with the pitch of politics, endured the concerted idiocy of the Asylum for incapables at Westminster for six

²¹ Liberals had won 58 seats in Scotland in 1885 but 7 of those were 'independent Liberals'.

²² Cunninghame Graham, *Gaucha Laird*. 292.

²³ D.W Crowley "The 'crofters' Party. 1885-1892". *The Scottish Historical Review* 35. 120 (1956) 121. Jones, 'Henry George and British Labor Politics' 250.

²⁴ House of Commons Debates 3rd August 1891. Vol 356 col. 1178.

²⁵ Cunninghame Graham, *Gaucha Laird*, 306-307.

²⁶ House of Commons Debates, 1st December 1888 col. 733.

²⁷ Ibid 4th May 1892 col.107.

²⁸ Cunninghame Graham, *Gaucha Laird*, 321.

years... now I think I may do my fooling alone, and leave the stage to younger fools...²⁹

There may have been another reason for leaving the Palace behind. He was going broke. RB was an MP before the introduction of the payment of members and so had to finance his own time in Westminster. He had no sponsorship so he had to rely on revenue from his estates. The original estimate of living costs made by his accountant had been too low and he could not afford another campaign.³⁰

The Scottish Labour Party.

The SLP has traditionally been viewed as primarily a precursor of the British Labour Party, as a regional manifestation of a larger movement, which would reach fruition in 1900 with the founding of the Labour Representation Committee.³¹ Much of this has to do with the prominence afforded to Keir Hardie as the principal instigator of the party. The orthodox narrative is that by the mid 1880s Hardie had grown increasingly frustrated at the lack of Scottish Liberal Federation support for working class candidates. In 1888, Hardie broke with the Liberals after he failed to gain the nomination of the party for an upcoming by-election at Mid Lanark though he had already been selected as the Liberal candidate for North Ayrshire.³² He decided to stand as an independent 'Labour and Home Rule' candidate at the election but was defeated. He won 817 votes out of a total poll of over 7,000 votes, but formed the Scottish Labour Party following the contest.

Hardie was certainly crucial: first as a candidate at Mid Lanark and then as the organiser of the first meeting of the SLP.³³ It should be noted though that a 'Scottish Labour Party' was first mooted at a Miners Conference in Edinburgh in 1887 before Mid-Lanark, with RB as its leader. The idea predated Hardie's intervention.³⁴ It is important also to write RB into the story of the SLP, as he was arguably the most prominent figure in the party throughout its short existence. In the words of the main historian of the party, RB 'alone voiced the aspiration of the workers in the debates in Westminster.'³⁵ RB was elected Honorary President of the new Party and ostensibly was an SLP MP until 1892.³⁶ His role in the SLP would be very similar that he would later play in the NPS and SNP as its public face, helping to shape the message of the party and also have a significant organisational role though not so much that it was too demanding. *President* was a very common title that he would be elected to throughout his political life. This is not to say he did little spade work for the SLP, he was involved at Westminster pushing legislation,

²⁹ Tschiffeley, *Don Roberto*, 263.

³⁰ Cunninghame Graham, *Gauche Laird*, 321.

³¹ Pugh, *Speak for Britain*, Loc 838.

³² Pelling, *Origins of the Labour Party*, 66.

³³ For the main account of the founding of the SLP see Lowe *Souvenirs of Scottish Labour* 1- 5.

³⁴ Pelling, *Origins of the Labour Party*, 70. Cunninghame Graham, *Gauche Laird*, 311.

³⁵ Lowe *Souvenirs of Scottish Labour*, 19.

³⁶ Dr. G.B. Clark, the Crofter's Party MP for Caithness was also an SLP supporter and Vice President of the party but he returned to the Liberal colours in 1892.

most notably agitating for an eight-hour working day for miners. In 1890, he led an abortive attempt to negotiate an electoral pact between Radical Liberal Associations and the SLP for future elections.³⁷

The SLP only lasted for six years from 1888 to 1894 when it voted unanimously at its conference on a motion from Hardie to wind up the party and to join the Independent Labour Party that had been founded a year earlier in Bradford.³⁸ The programme of the SLP adopted at its first conference was a mix of ideas drawn from Radical Liberal, Land League, Fabian Socialist and Labour reform movements. It supported reform of government; home rule all round, and disestablishment of the churches that were key Radical Liberal ideas. It called for the nationalisation of the land and minerals, which was a central demand of the SLRL, and for an eight-hour working day amongst other Labour reforms. This hodgepodge of ideas was reflective of the make up of the party that was drawn from all of these different groups.

The breadth of the coalition was essential as the party sought to appeal to a very disparate electorate. The SLP could not succeed solely by appealing to working class voters as despite recent franchise reform in the 1884 Representation of the People Act³⁹ which increased the Scottish electorate from 293,581 in 1880 to 560,580 in 1885 it only enfranchised around a third of all working men.⁴⁰ It needed support from rural voters in the Highlands and Islands, Radical Liberals from the suburbs, the Labour aristocracy, those workers affluent enough to gain the right to vote, the Irish and used the lure of Land Reform and Home Rule to gain support from amongst them. It failed totally to build this coalition. The pull of the Liberal Party was still too strong, especially as it championed almost all of the same things as the SLP. Trades Unions were also still close to the Liberals and when they pushed for representation they set up a rival party in the Scottish United Trades Council's Labour Party to the SLP in 1892.⁴¹

Of particular note for the SLP in general and RB in particular was a troubled relationship with the Irish Catholic Community. As noted RB had attributed his success in Lanark North West to the support he had garnered from the Irish. However right from the start the SLP had trouble making inroads in the Catholic Community. At the Mid Lanark by-election Charles Parnell had personally intervened to urge support for the official Liberal candidate and not Hardie.⁴² Ironically it was to be RB's friendship with Parnell which was to prove his undoing with the main newspaper of the Catholic Community in the West of Scotland *The Glasgow Observer* which reminded voters at the 1892 General Election that RB had supported the Parnellite candidate John Redmond at the expense of Michael Davitt at a by-election at Waterford earlier that year and that he was a 'Scottish

³⁷ Pelling, *Origins of the Labour Party*, 102.

³⁸ Lowe *Souvenirs of Scottish Labour*, 170

³⁹ *Representation of the People Act, 1884*, 48 & 49 Vict. C. 3

⁴⁰ *British Electoral Facts 1832-1987*, compiled and edited by F.W.S. Craig (Parliamentary Research Services 1989).

⁴¹ Michael Keating and David Bleiman, *Labour and Scottish Nationalism*, (London: Macmillan, 1979) 53.

⁴² Pelling, *Origins of the Labour Party*, 66

Landlord'.⁴³ The *Observer* after the election blamed RB for acting as a spoiler candidate as he split the vote enough to allow for the Liberal Unionist candidate to defeat the Gladstonian Liberal. RB for his part was somewhat ungracious in defeat and blamed 'the attacks of reactionary priestcraft' for his poor showing.⁴⁴

What was the legacy of the SLP to the Scottish National Party? Cunninghame Graham's presence in the SLP establishes a link between modern Scottish Nationalism and the radical politics of the late nineteenth century. It allows for the SNP to claim to be the inheritor, alongside the Liberal and Labour parties, of a definable radical tradition in Scottish politics, rather than as an idiosyncratic narrow nationalist party only concerned with the recovery of a romantic notion of lost nationhood. Not only is it part of this tradition, through RB's intellectual contribution there is also the emergence of a distinctive vision of Scottish Home rule as a vital element in the achievement of social justice. This *leitmotif* will be revisited not only throughout his time in the self government movement but will be present in the writings and approach of the likes of Roland Muirhead, John McCormick, and Jim Sillars all of whom will journey towards Scottish Nationalism from the political left as RB had. Sillars would form his own version of the Scottish Labour Party in 1976 before joining the SNP in 1980.

In addition intellectuals and activists within the SNP would interpret the state of Scotland as not just attributable to exclusively constitutional factors but also to social and economic factors which were exacerbated by the lack of national sovereignty. Stephen Maxwell summed it up as 'one of the most persistent strands in SNP Rhetoric – the appeal to the socialist home rule traditions of Keir Hardie and the Scottish ILPers.'⁴⁵ RB is in many ways the unacknowledged father of this brand of Left wing Nationalism and the 1888-1894 SLP an unacknowledged precursor of the modern SNP.

Attitude to Scottish Home Rule to 1894.

Whereas RB's commitment to socialism and liberalism were transient aspects of his political identity, there is no doubt that support for Scottish self-government was a constant feature of his politics. However what he regarded as 'self-government' was not fixed and evolved over the course of his 50-year association with the home rule movement. A second aspect crucial to his vision of Scottish self-government was the purpose of Home Rule as part of his commitment to social justice. We can trace the evolution of his approach to Scottish Home Rule as well as see how a commitment to social change interweaves over the course of his political life. This section evaluates his approach to Home Rule from the period 1886 to 1894, later we shall look further at his pronouncements especially in the later period of his life when he became a pioneer figure in the Scottish Nationalist movement from 1928-1936.

⁴³ *Glasgow Observer*, 9th January 1892.

⁴⁴ J.J. Smyth, *Labour in Glasgow, 1896-1936. Socialism, Suffrage and Sectarianism*, (Scottish Historical Review Monograph) (Edinburgh: Tuckwell, 2000) 132.

⁴⁵ Stephen Maxwell, "The '79 Group: A Critical Retrospect." in *The Case for Left Wing Nationalism, essay and articles* by Stephen Maxwell. Edited by Jamie Maxwell. (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2013). Kindle edition. 2012.

Cunninghame Graham came to the cause of self-government through the Scottish Home Rule Association (SHRA). The organisation was founded in Edinburgh 1886. It emerged from two developments, first Gladstone's Irish Home Rule Bill and second due to the success of the Irish Party in Westminster elections in 1885 which effectively held the balance of power withheld 85 of the 101 Irish seats. Home rule was a key Radical demand and the Irish had shown how salient the issue could be electorally. The SHRA attracted not just Radical Liberals such as RB but a whole generation of new activists who would have a major role to play in the evolving party system. Keir Hardie was a vice-President, as was Robert Smillie another Scottish Labour pioneer and the secretary of the London Branch where RB was on the executive committee was Ramsey MacDonald. MacDonald would drift away from the SHRA in the mid 1890s though he was mooted as a potential Home Rule candidate for one of the Aberdeen constituencies at the 1892 General Election.⁴⁶ MacDonald, on behalf of the London branch of the SHRA, sent a letter in support of Hardie at Mid-Lanark,

Let the Consequences of be what they may, do not withdraw. The cause of Labour and of Scottish Nationality will suffer much thereby. Your defeat will awaken Scotland and your victory will reconstruct Scottish Liberalism. All success be yours, and the cause you champion.'⁴⁷

This failure notwithstanding the SHRA did succeed in bringing the issue of Scottish home rule to Westminster in 1889. In April 1889, RB and Dr G. Clark moved the motion. Gladstone also spoke in the debate as did Arthur Balfour. The debate allows us to see not only the character of the arguments used by supporters and opponents of Scottish home rule and differences of approach from within the home rule movement including within the Scottish Labour Party with Clark and Cunninghame Graham somewhat at odds with each other.

Clark proposed the motion and set out his terms for a Scottish parliament based on grounds familiar to Radical Liberals of the era. First, he argued that Scottish issues were neglected. He drew attention to education as an example where reform of Scottish education had to wait until England had a national system in 1870 'and then it was revised on English lines'⁴⁸ the following year for Scotland. His second point was that 'Scotch opinion is overwhelmed by uneducated English opinion.'⁴⁹ He drew attention to topics such as temperance and Church disestablishment where English MPs over-rode the wishes of Scottish members. His solution was a federal system with Home Rule all round across 'every section of the Empire'.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ David Marquand, *Ramsey MacDonald: A Biography*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1977) 23.

⁴⁷ Andrew Marr, *The Battle for Scotland*, (London: Penguin, 1992) p.57.

⁴⁸ House of Commons Debates April 9th 1889 vol 335, col 70.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ ibid col 73.

In his contribution, RB offered an alternative rationale for Home Rule. 'I do not wish to support this proposal on specifically on national grounds.'⁵¹ Instead he believed that there was,

...a great and growing feeling in favour of home rule in Scotland (which comes) from the extreme misery of a certain section of the Scottish population... and they wish to have their own members under their own hands, in order to extort legislation from them suitable to relieve that misery.⁵²

He argued that Scotland was 'much riper', as he described it, for progressive legislation such on such as the 'eight hours question.'⁵³ In terms of the land question, RB proposed that a Scottish legislature would not support a solution based on forced emigration. He also envisioned a parliament where 'we should find the working classes much more represented than is the case here.'⁵⁴ His approach to home rule was to see it as a means to effect radical social change, promote social justice and to have a political system that was more of a tribune for the people as opposed to landed and financial interests.

There was also a memorable exchange between RB and A.J Balfour. The Conservative minister sought to use RB's speech to chide Gladstone and portray Home Rule not only in Scotland but also in Ireland as a result of 'socialistic agitation.'⁵⁵ Balfour said

he wants Home Rule for Scotland because he wants socialism in Scotland. ["Hear hear" from Mr. Graham] He admits, therefore, that I have not misrepresented or exaggerated his sentiments.

Mr. Graham (Lanark N.W) I always stand by my words.⁵⁶

This was the authentic voice of Cunninghame Graham expressing the cause he would devote the rest of his life to. He would grow more sympathetic to what he had previously denounced as 'sentimental grounds' for Home Rule and move towards separate statehood for Scotland. Joining of the cause of Scottish democracy to social justice would provide a thread of radicalism that would interweave throughout the history of the SHRA, the NPS and the SNP and resonate to the present day.

The motion was defeated by 200 votes to 79. A motion on Scottish home rule would be passed in 1894 and others in 1895 and 1912 but all efforts to transform a general endorsement of the idea into legislation failed though a bill did get as far as a second reading in 1913. The Liberals returned to power in 1905 and despite a commitment to home rule for Ireland only moved on the issue when it was forced

⁵¹ Ibid col 98.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid col.99.

⁵⁵ Ibid col.

⁵⁶ Ibid

to after the two deadlocked 1910 General Elections made them reliant on the Irish Party. Even then support was lukewarm and they prevaricated due to Ulster resistance and threats of violence. It was no surprise that the Liberals were cold on home rule all round when trying to legislate for it in Ireland turned into a nightmare. The SHRA had done its job in pushing for the maximum support amongst the Liberal and the emerging Labour Parties but this had produced no tangible results. This left a major question what was the best route to achieve Home Rule?

From the SHRA to GUSNA.

Following the 1892 General Election, RB spent most of the next two decades travelling and writing. He seems to have remained involved in Labour politics until at least 1894 as he was present at the inaugural conference of the ILP in 1893 and was at the last SLP meeting the following year. During the First World War, his skills and contacts in the horse trade in South America were used to identify supplies of horses for the British army. It seems that he did not totally abandon Liberal politics as well. He was persuaded to stand as an independent Liberal in the West Stirlingshire constituency in the 1918 General Election. A Unionist Harry Hope and Thomas Johnston from the ILP and a future Secretary of State for Scotland opposed him. He came third with 2,582 votes with Hope winning the seat. He confessed to Neil Munro, Scottish novelist and writer, that he was 'sick of the infernal folly of elections.'⁵⁷

The only political organisation RB associated without the start of the 1920s was the revived Scottish Home Rule Association. The SHRA had become defunct by 1914 following the failure of the Liberals to carry the 1913 Scottish Home Rule Act in Parliament. Roland Muirhead, the secretary of the Lochwinnoch ILP, was the 'principle architect' of the new SHRA in 1918.⁵⁸ It was becoming apparent in the early 1920s that the Liberals had been eclipsed by an ascendant Labour Party. The SHRA was pinning its hopes on Labour until 1924 when an attempt to advance home rule was stifled by a combination of parliamentary procedure and Ramsey MacDonald's growing indifference. The former secretary of the London Branch of the SHRA in a letter to Muirhead abdicated responsibility for legislative initiatives telling him to contact the relevant government minister rather than him in future.⁵⁹

A further attempt in 1927 to put home rule on to the statute book was also frustrated by obstruction and ambivalence at Westminster. However by 1927 there was evidence that there was momentum building for a Nationalist party that sought to challenge the London based parties electorally. In 1920, the Scots National League was founded, led by William Gillies and Ruairaidh Erskine of Mar. Richard Finlay has argued that the SNL 'was the most important of all the interwar nationalist groups, especially with regard to the future development of Scottish Nationalist philosophy.'⁶⁰ It championed 'Independence' or separate statehood for

⁵⁷ Tschiffeley, *Don Roberto*, 380.

⁵⁸ Richard Finlay, *Independent and Free, Scottish Politics and the Origins of the Scottish National Party*, (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1994), 1.

⁵⁹ *ibid* 10.

⁶⁰ *ibid* 29.

Scotland. More important in a practical sense was that it had 1,000 members and 15 branches by the mid-1920s as well as an official newspaper the *Scots Independent* that acted as the mouthpiece for the movement.⁶¹ Within the SHRA Robert Muirhead, the brother of Roland, had helped to found the Scottish National Party Group which was lobbying for the association to reinvent itself as a political party. Roland was himself promoting the idea of Scottish National Convention to take out of Westminster's hands the whole issue of Home Rule and instead vest it in a forum where partisan concerns, such as the status of Scottish MPs voting in Westminster, which had been a major stumbling block in 1924, would be less problematic. A third development in 1927 was the founding of the Glasgow University Student Nationalist Association (GUSNA) led by John MacCormick.

RB's involvement in the SHRA in the early to mid twenties was sporadic. He was often invited onto Home Rule platforms. In 1920 however he refused to attend one SHRA meeting arranged in support of Irish nationalists over the violence perpetrated by members of the IRA against British soldiers. In a letter to the secretary of the association he reaffirmed his commitment to Scottish home rule but decried Mr de Valera and the 'international Jews' in New York who he claimed were behind the violence. He tried to mitigate his anti-Semitic remarks in a postscript to the letter by saying 'I have, of course, no idea of imputing complicity in murder to the Jews as a race'.⁶² This sort of indecorous language was not uncommon in his correspondence. It is difficult to know RB's attitude to all of the machinations going on within and outwith of the SHRA at this time although he was a senior figure in the body.

Since 1648, the undergraduates of Glasgow University have had as their advocate in the government of the institution the post of Rector. The rector was elected every three years and 1928 was to be election year. In MacCormick's account of events, he was trying to think of who might be a suitable and substantial prospective candidate. He wrote that RB 'came vaguely into mind' as a possibility and became certain after reading one his books *Hope* and reading the preface to GB Shaw's *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* the main character of which is based on RB.⁶³ RB turned out to be an energetic candidate, despite being 78 years old, and came within 70 votes of beating his rival, incumbent Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin.

RB, NPS and the SNP.

By the time of the Rectorial Election in the autumn of 1928 the final stages of a merger involving the SNL, the SHRA, Scots National Movement (a split off from the SNL) and GUSNA had taken place in time for the launch in November of the National Party of Scotland (NPS). Finlay has argued that RB did not play much of a role in the negotiations.⁶⁴ Tschiffeley has claimed that RB had been named President of the NPS as early as March in 1928 but according to MacCormick this

⁶¹ *ibid* 66.

⁶² Tschiffeley, *Don Roberto*, 380-81.

⁶³ MacCormick, *The Flag on the Wind*, 520.

⁶⁴ Finlay, *Independent and Free*, 80.

did not take place until the first conference in November.⁶⁵ The role he would play in the NPS was largely honorary though he would participate in the later negotiations in 1933/34 that would see a further merging of the fragments of the national movement with the NPS to form the Scottish National Party.⁶⁶

Although not part of the managerial team in the NPS, he was the most prominent spokesperson for the party. His first major address for the party came following the Glasgow University campaign. He gave a typically acerbic speech delivered in the words of MacCormick of an 'oratory of Victorian vintage but he was master of the art.'⁶⁷ He addressed the need for a further party when there were already four. The Conservatives he said 'were assured that everything was alright so long as they remained in power'.⁶⁸ The Liberals were too occupied with the fate and future of Lloyd George. The ILP was too pious and the Communists too interested in bloodshed and bound to Moscow. The NPS was 'the only party fit to push on the national aspirations and regain once more control of all Scottish National affairs.'⁶⁹

As spokesman he made a number of important statements shaping the nature of Scottish Nationalism. According to MacCormick RB was always 'at our service for big meetings'.⁷⁰ Arguably his most famous first speech was given at the annual meeting on the NPS at Bannockburn in June 1930. The speech portrays Scottish Nationhood not just as an idea drawn from antiquity or from the memory of a long ago fought battle but also based on modern notions of national self-determination. He pointed to the world of nation states that had emerged in the aftermath of the Great War, where since 1919 20 new nationalities had emerged. He described 'Nationality... as the atmosphere of the world' and that it was 'a sin against political science' for Scotland to be 'subservient, should be a mere appendage of the predominant partner, a mere county of England' and be denied the same status as that enjoyed by others across the world.⁷¹ In this speech RB was moving further towards independence than before.

Conclusion.

R. B. Cunninghame Graham was in many ways one of the founding fathers of the modern SNP. First he was a vital element in bringing into being a separate political party devoted to Scottish home rule. He did this by being able to lend respectability and credibility to the cause initially through his candidature for rector at Glasgow University in 1928 but subsequently through drawing members away from the Scottish Home Rule Association towards the National Party of Scotland. Second his 'star-power' in the late twenties and early thirties was able to bring prominence to a movement that was largely obscure and peripheral. Although he did not transform it into a mainstream party he could at least use his celebrity, which was

⁶⁵ MacCormick, J.M, *The Flag on the Wind*, 520.

⁶⁶ Ibid 1187.

⁶⁷ Ibid 520.

⁶⁸ *Glasgow Herald* 29th October 1928, 8.

⁶⁹ *ibid*.

⁷⁰ MacCormick, J.M, *The Flag on the Wind*, 520.

⁷¹ R.B Cunninghame Graham, 'Nationality is the Atmosphere of the World' in *Great Scottish Speeches*. Edited by David Torrance (Edinburgh: Luath, 2011) 98-99.

still considerable even nearly 40 years after he had lost his seat in parliament, to attract attention from the media and provide a platform for the NPS and the SNP which, arguably, it would not have received otherwise.

Third he brought with him a vision of Scottish Nationalism that would connect the NPS and the SNP to the SLP and other manifestations of Scottish Radicalism that gave the movement greater depth and relevance to contemporary Scotland. RB's interpretation of Scottish home rule was that it was more than just a sentimental longing for a lost nation, that it was more than just a tidy administrative change which sought to bring greater democratic accountability to pre-existing distinctive Scottish institutions such as the legal and educational systems. He viewed home rule as a vital element in addressing unique the social and economic problems of Scotland, which had been neglected at Westminster that he saw as representing privilege and big business. From his first statement on the issue in the House of Commons in 1889 and as a radical Socialist through to his last speeches as the first President of the Scottish National Party he maintained this analysis and in doing so laid down a template which the Modern SNP has built upon.